

control of the courtroom, whether the jurors felt like they were treated with courtesy and respect by court personnel and whether the jurors felt safe and secure in the courthouse and courtroom, among others. Additionally, a suggestion box has been placed at the entrance of the 406<sup>th</sup> District Court courtroom to encourage recommendations and suggestions. Importantly, the juror responses to date have reassured the Court that its current security measures, juror accommodations, and courtroom management are adequate and appropriate.

### International Judicial Collaboration

Judge Hale spearheaded the inaugural conference between South Texas judges and judges from the Mexican State of Tamaulipas. In that regard, due to a 2008 constitutional amendment to the Mexican Constitution, Mexican law now requires oral hearings on all criminal and some civil cases. This new law mandated each of the Mexican states to phase in the new procedures by 2016. The Tamaulipas judicial contingency reached out to Judge Hale in late 2016, requesting an opportunity to engage in a comprehensive roundtable discussion and overview of the American Jurisprudence process. Consequently, Judge Hale has hosted three "International Judicial Conferences" with the attendance of over 30 state judges from Mexico and from the southern region of Texas. The judges from Mexico have been afforded access to the 406<sup>th</sup> District Court courtroom to observe oral hearings and jury trials in action.



**Student Internships / Teacher Externships** — As part of his internship program, and to help students choose a career path, Judge Hale hosts students from Texas A&M International University who, as a requirement for graduation, need to complete an internship of 160 hours. Former interns have expressed that witnessing oral court proceedings and trials and interacting with the presiding judge and other court personnel has given them a clearer perspective and understanding about the administration of justice. Moreover, Judge Hale and the 406<sup>th</sup> District Court staff, annually host teachers from the United Independent School District as part of the school district's Externship program. These teachers return to their campuses and proudly share their newly acquired legal knowledge and courtroom experiences.

### Media Access/Video Conferencing

Judge Hale was credited by the local media for being the first Judge in Webb County to grant the media outlets more access to the courts by openly allowing video cameras in the courtroom in order to make court proceedings more transparent and more accessible to the public.

By utilizing state forfeiture funds, Judge Hale brought to fruition the establishment of a remote video broadcasting system to allow child victims' testimony to take place before the court and jury. A separate video conference room is situated on the top floor of the Webb County Justice Center and is available, in appropriate cases, for child victims to testify remotely without having to be physically present in the same courtroom as the defendant. This system has also been utilized to conduct arraignments and other hearings by permitting defendants and witnesses to testify in the 406<sup>th</sup> District Court courtroom via remote locations. This process has saved the tax payers money on transportation costs to and from the various state jail facilities and, more

importantly, has benefitted child victims by facilitating remote access to the courtroom.

## Equal Justice—Under Law



Judge Oscar Jesús Hale, Jr.

### 406th Judicial District Court

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### ACCESS TO JUSTICE INITIATIVES

Judge Oscar Jesus Hale, Jr. was sworn in as District Judge of the 406<sup>th</sup> District Court on January 1, 2005, and re-elected to the Bench on November 4, 2008, November 6, 2012, and November 8, 2016.

During his tenure as the presiding judge of the 406<sup>th</sup> Judicial District Court, and after identifying the needs of the community of Webb County, Judge Hale has implemented and established programs to help provide equal access to justice for all Webb County residents.





**Courts in School Program** — Judge Hale envisioned the idea of transforming a school auditorium or gymnasium into a courtroom—complete with Judge, lawyers, bailiff and defendant — in order to provide a real-world lesson to students. This idea resulted in the “Courts in School” Program wherein defendants with drug charges are sentenced at a local school campus in the presence of hundreds of students. The program allows students access to witness the criminal justice system at work and to understand the consequences for engaging in drug related activity. After the defendants have been sentenced, Judge Hale offers the students an opportunity to ask questions. Judge Beckie Palomo has also adopted this project and has conducted dozens of hearings at local school campuses. Recently, a delegation of District Court Judges and law enforcement officials from Hidalgo County attended a ‘Courts in School’ event in Webb County as they prepare to launch their own similar program in Hidalgo County during the 2018 fall semester.



**406<sup>th</sup> District Regional Adult Drug Court Program** — Understanding the importance of addressing the growing opiate and substance abuse epidemic, and after being inspired by Judge John Creuzot, Judge Hale implemented a drug court program (DCP) in Webb County. The DCP program provides case management and counseling services for all

participants to help guide them on their road to sobriety. The program also provides these individuals with access to rehabilitation facilities that are equipped to help them regain self-esteem and self-dependency and return to being productive members of society. In 2018, the Drug Court Program received a SAMHSA grant that will help expand its services to the adjacent counties of Jim Hogg, Starr and Zapata. Judge Hale, together with Judge Beckie Palomo, expanded the DCP by establishing the Veterans Treatment Program, a component of the DCP, to address the veteran population in Webb County and surrounding counties.



**Pro Se Family Dockets** — Judge Hale noticed a significant increase in *Pro Se* divorce case filings in Webb County and responded by scheduling a separate monthly afternoon docket to accommodate those *Pro Se* litigants. This separate docket gives the court staff an opportunity to provide general legal information (waivers, decrees, etc.) to self-represented litigants. The afternoon docket affords those litigants, who may have day time employment, an opportunity to attend work and also allows the court to have all of the necessary documents prepared and ready for trial on the merits in order to dispense final justice on the case. After seeing the success and efficiency of the *Pro Se* docket, Judge Hale, in partnership with the other district judges (Judges Monica Notzon, Beckie Palomo and Joe Lopez), established a process wherein the *Pro Se* docket of all Webb County district courts could be consolidated and heard once a month.

*Pro Se* dockets give litigants access to the courts by allowing self-representation in uncontested divorce cases. Moreover, Judge Hale, along with other Webb County judges, presides over the Social Justice Night Court (SJNC), which is a joint project of the Webb County Board of Judges, the local Bar Association and the Texas Rio Grande Legal Aid (TRLA). The purpose of the SJNC is to provide representation for indigent individuals residing in Webb County who need assistance with uncontested legal matters, including expunctions and guardianships.

**Monthly Adoption Day** — Judge Hale identified a need to separate adoption hearings from other general civil cases. A separate docket allows the adopting families and their prospective adoptive children to celebrate this joyous occasion without being exposed to a potential contentious and stressful courtroom environment that sometimes accompanies other civil and family law cases. During this special docket the courtroom is decorated with balloons, flowers and stuffed animals to make the adoption experience all that more memorable for the families.



**Initiative to Deter Domestic Violence** Judge Hale collaborated with the Webb County Sheriff's Department and Casa Misericordia by applying for, and receiving, the U.S. Department of Justice Office of Violence Against Women FY2018 Justice for Families grant. With these resources, the 406<sup>th</sup> District Court, the Webb County Sheriff's Department, and Casa Misericordia will assist families by staffing a “Safe-Haven” center with key personnel who are trained

to conduct supervised parent-child visits and to safeguard visitation exchanges between parents. Judge Hale actively participates with the Safe Haven center by referring families for services and by admonishing the non-compliant parties in his courtroom on a monthly basis. Additionally, Judge Hale coordinates monthly advisory board meetings between all the stakeholders to discuss the needs of the center and the progress of this program.

**Keeping Kids in School and Out of Court** Judge Hale collaborated with representatives from a local alternative high school, the Laredo Independent School District Jose A. Valdez High School, in order to provide a second chance to students with misdemeanor offenses. This school enrolls students who may have dropped out of school and who are still under the age of 21 years old. Selected students are enrolled in a six-month court supervised program wherein they attend a weekly cognitive behavior course sponsored by the court, attend bi-weekly court sessions before the judge, and submit to random weekly drug testing conducted and funded by the school district. During the six-month course the students are taught the importance of attending and completing school together with the legal consequences associated with criminal activity. Upon successful completion of the six-month program, and with pre-approval by the district attorney's office, these students may have their misdemeanor category offense dismissed. The goal of the “Keeping Kids in School and Out of Court” program is to deter any future criminal activity.

**Juror Surveys** — In an effort to improve services, Judge Hale provides a survey to all jurors who have served on a jury trial at the 406<sup>th</sup> District Court. The survey includes questions such as whether the court makes reasonable efforts to remove all disabilities and language barriers, whether the judge had good judicial temperament and good